DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 440 732 PS 028 454

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TITLE	Home Visiting: A Vermont Approach to Working with Young Children and Their Families.
INSTITUTION	Vermont State Agency of Human Services, Waterbury.
PUB DATE	1999-10-00
NOTE	17p.; Supported by Vermont Head Start--State Collaborative Office.
CONTRACT	90-CD-0985
AVAILABLE FROM	Vermont Agency of Human Services, 103 South Main Street, Waterbury, VT 05671-0104. Tel: 800-727-3687 (Toll Free).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Family Programs; *Home Programs; *Home Visits; Integrated Services; *Interpersonal Competence; Interpersonal Relationship; Social Services
IDENTIFIERS	Family Support; *Home Visitors; Program Characteristics; *Vermont

ABSTRACT

Home visiting is a way of providing services to children and families. Based on the experiences of home visitors in Vermont, this booklet discusses promising home visiting practices. Following a preface and introduction, the book's sections are: (1) "The Home Visiting Relationship"; (2) "The Home Visit: Essential Components"; (3) "The Home Visit: Defining Expectations"; (4) "The Home Visit: Structure of the Home Visit"; (5) "The Home Visitor: Essential Personal Characteristics"; (6) "The Home Visitor: Skills, Experience, and Knowledge"; and (7) "Organizational Support for the Home Visitor." The booklet concludes with a list of Vermont Programs that offer home visits. (LPP)

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HOME VISITING

A VERMONT APPROACH TO WORKING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

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PUBLISHED BY:

Vermont Agency of Human Services
103 South Main Street, Waterbury, Vermont 05671-0104

Funding for production of this document made possible through the support of the Vermont Head Start – State Collaboration Office, Grant # 90-CD 0985.

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The authors of this guide have chosen to use the pronoun "she" to represent the home visitor throughout this document. We use the terms "parent" and "family" in a broad sense, recognizing the diverse makeup of today's families.

PREFACE

When you hear the word "Vermont," what comes to mind?

- Newly painted clapboard houses surrounded by blazing maple trees in the fall, rambling farm houses with lilac bushes all around.
- New and older homes, blended side by side amidst remnants of the farmland and woods that used to be there; parents balancing family and work; kids playing outside where there's more space than in their homes.
- An apartment carved out of a converted barn, children crying, wind whipping through the cracks in the doors, the wood too wet to get a good fire started.
- Mud season, a trailer at the end of the road, no telephone, no neighbors, no car.

These are all pictures of Vermont. There's remarkable diversity and variety in the homes where parents raise their children. Yet any of these homes could be the site of a home visit.

Over the years, parents have graciously opened their homes to a variety of professionals offering to help them with the wonderful and challenging job of raising children. Visit by visit, conversation by conversation, tears and laughter — parents and professionals develop a mutual relationship that supports parents in creating better lives for their children.

This book provides a glimpse into the promising practices that have emerged from this alliance based on mutual respect and caring. While sometimes we as home visitors have fallen short of our goals, we learn from our mistakes and create better ways of working together to support young children. We hope you will enjoy the lessons learned from the many home visitors in this state and the variety of families with whom they have shared their caring and expertise. We hope you will learn how parents have helped home visitors understand the realities facing Vermont families.

Together, home visitors are helping to create communities in which all children are valued and parents are supported in their critical role as primary care givers, teachers, and nurturers. It's a community in which all of us are given the chance to participate in the joy of contributing to the healthy, thriving development of our children.

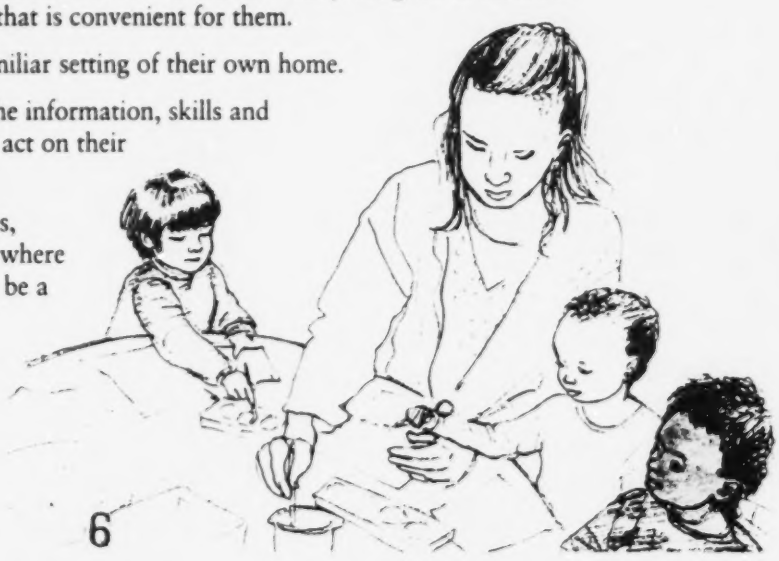
We hope you will find this information helpful in your own work. We encourage you to incorporate your thoughts and ideas as you learn more about home visiting as an effective way of supporting positive child development.

INTRODUCTION

Home visiting is a way of providing services to children and families. It is one piece of a comprehensive system of service and support. Bringing services to the home has a long tradition. Some of us remember the family doctor's house calls with fondness. We recall the safety and comfort of receiving help in our own home. We cherish the memory of knowing that someone cared about our well-being enough to travel all the way to our house. These are some of the same reasons that organizations choose home visiting as a way of delivering services today.

The effectiveness of home visits is built on establishing personal relationships. Effective home visiting:

- recognizes parents as the primary decision makers. Children and families are best understood by learning about and appreciating the beliefs, goals and cultures of the families.
- considers all aspects of families' lives and is individually designed to meet the family's goals at a time that is convenient for them.
- meets families in the familiar setting of their own home.
- provides families with the information, skills and confidence they need to act on their own behalf.
- is convenient for families, especially in rural areas where traveling to services can be a challenge.
- links isolated families to other families, supports, and services.



THE HOME VISITING RELATIONSHIP

"At the core of any home visiting program is the relationship between parents and the home visitor. ...all human development occurs both through and within relationships which are patterns of interaction over time. Just as the everyday patterns of parent-child interaction are the most powerful influences on infant and child development, so too, the parent-home visitor relationship can be central to promoting parent development and enhancing the parent's relationship with their child."

— Carol S. Klass[†]

THE HOME VISITOR AND PARENT AS PARTNERS.

A trusting and caring relationship built on mutual respect is an essential component of home visiting.

THE HOME VISITOR AS A TEACHER.

The home visitor helps a family learn about various aspects of family life, such as the way children grow; the way their brains develop; the importance of language and books; the essentials of basic nutrition; the value of regular health care; the effects of drug abuse, violence, and emotional stress on children; and resources available in the community.

THE HOME VISITOR AS A COACH.

The home visitor helps parents to act and advocate on their own and their children's behalf by offering suggestions, support, and encouragement. The parent supports this coaching relationship by helping the home visitor understand the "roadblocks" the parent faces.

THE HOME VISITOR AS A RESOURCE.

The home visitor provides accurate, relevant information to the family. The family may also inform the home visitor about resources.

THE HOME VISITOR AS A LINK TO SERVICES.

Sometimes the home visitor helps the family with basic needs such as income, housing, safety, food, and health care. Other times she may be called upon to make referrals to more specialized services.

As in any relationship these roles are not distinct, nor do they follow each other in any regular order. The home visitor is a respectful and enthusiastic listener who assists the family in many different ways.

[†]The Home Visitor-Parent Relationship. *Bulletin of Zero to Three*, February/March 1997, Vol. 17, No. 4

THE HOME VISIT: ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS

"... a central challenge for those working with parents is to distinguish in one's work ... between outreach and intrusiveness, between guiding parents and lecturing them, between providing them with the tangible supports they appear to need and enabling them to get these for themselves, between imposing, even in a benovelent fashion, one's own goals for them and helping them to define and consider their own goals for themselves."

— Provence and Naylor, 1983†

PURPOSE

The major focus of home visiting is to enable families to carry out their role as their child's first and most important teacher, caretaker, and advocate.

ASSESSING FAMILY STRENGTHS AND NEEDS

All families have strengths and resources which can form the basis of their ability to solve problems and to achieve their goals. It is critical that the home visitor and the family work together to identify these strengths and needs. The home visitor acknowledges and appreciates the family's interests, strengths, and accomplishments. Focusing on what's wrong can be a barrier to achieving the family's goals. Recognition of successes and achievements is a critical part of the process. The home visitor works as a partner with families to assess the current situation.

PLANNING AND GOAL SETTING

Based on an assessment of strengths and needs, the home visitor and family jointly plan and set goals. The home visitor helps the family to identify their hopes and dreams, set goals, and develop strengths and the skills needed to achieve them. Just as situations change over time, the home visitor and family reassess the goals and progress. Over time, respectful, flexible, and skillful interaction with the family helps its members become better aware of where they are and where they want to be.

APPRECIATION OF DIFFERENCES

Each individual is seen within the context of the whole family, the community, and the culture in which one lives. There are many different types of families, each with its own unique characteristics and backgrounds. Central to the home visiting approach is respect for these differences and the ability to remain objective.

INTENSITY AND DURATION

In some cases home visits may occur only once or twice while in other cases they may continue over longer periods of time. Visits may be brief or may last several hours depending on the situation. Scheduling of home visits should be mutually agreed upon by the family and home visitor.

ENDING THE HOME VISITING RELATIONSHIP

After working closely together as partners, special preparation must be given to ending the professional

†Working with Disadvantaged Parents and Their Children

relationship as services draw to an end. It is common for children, parents and the home visitor to develop strong feelings toward one another. Feelings can be acknowledged as future plans are made with the family. Sometimes a closing activity, such as a special celebration or good-bye books, helps with the transition for family members and the home visitor.

THE HOME VISIT: DEFINING EXPECTATIONS

Clear expectations help to improve relationships. Mutual expectations should be honestly discussed at the beginning of services. Many programs include a letter of commitment in their enrollment package. The agreement is discussed together and signed by both the parent(s) and the home visitor. The following are some of the topics that are helpful to address.

PROGRAM GOALS

The goals of the program are carefully explained to the parents. What services will be provided? How often? How long will services last? It is also important for parents to understand what is expected of them and what they can expect from the home visitor.

ROLES AND PERSONAL BOUNDARIES

It is important that families understand the professional role of the home visitor including what she can and can not do. There is often confusion about the level of personal relationship that will feel comfortable to both parties. Will the home visitor give out her home telephone number? When they meet in the grocery store, what kind of greeting will be exchanged? The answers to these questions are likely to vary depending upon the type of program and relationship. Caring feelings may develop between the home visitor and family members, becoming the basis for trust and growth. At the same time, it is important to set limits and maintain clarity about the professional nature of the relationship.

Program policies and state laws may also define boundaries. For example, families must be made aware that the home visitor is required by law to report suspected child abuse or neglect.

THE HOME SETTING

It is important to define the boundaries that will both respect the personal space of the family's home and provide a conducive setting for the work of the visit. For example, the home visitor may request that the television be turned off and the family may determine that certain days or times are not appropriate for visits.

THE HOME VISIT: STRUCTURE OF THE HOME VISIT

A typical home visit consists of several components. They generally occur in order, one flowing into another. While structure is important during the home visit, it is equally important that the home visitor be flexible. A relaxed and conversational tone is important as the home visitor listens and responds to the family.

The following components should be included in each visit:

PREPARATION

Before the visit, the home visitor reviews the family's goals and plans. Based on the plan, appropriate activities and materials are selected for the visit.

GREETING

The way a family is approached and greeted by the home visitor sets the tone for the whole visit. The greeting should be warm and personal and address each adult and child in the room. The home visitor reviews the plans for the day with the family.

CHECK-IN

The family and home visitor have an opportunity to talk about events, accomplishments, and concerns that have come up since they were last together. They share any material or information in response to questions or requests made during the last visit or by phone.

HOME VISIT ACTIVITIES

The content of this section will vary according to the particular service focus of the program. It may be an early childhood activity in which parents and children participate. It may be a discussion about a family issue that has arisen such as employment, transportation, or housing. It may be a specific physical or developmental therapy, a conversation about nutrition, health care maintenance, parenting or child development, or a discussion about a child's or a family's progress. Unexpected situations may arise which will cause the planned activity to be adjusted or rescheduled.

PLANNING

Each visit should include time for planning to ensure that parents are involved in setting the agenda for working together. It is a time to focus on goals and the necessary steps toward achieving them. The family and home visitor plan and schedule the next visit, and identify tasks or projects to be completed in the interim. Plans may be written and a copy left with the family. Some programs assist with planning and organization by providing calendars, date books, or loose-leaf binders, or making them with the family.

EVALUATION

It is important to ask the family how well the visits are serving the family's needs. It must be very clear to the family that the home visitor wants honest feedback in order to improve services. Feedback may also be obtained through written evaluations, surveys, self-assessments, and questionnaires.

CONCLUSION

The visit should end on time, respecting the family's schedule. Good-byes include a discussion about the mutually agreed upon time and date of the next visit and the activities that have been planned.

THE HOME VISITOR: ESSENTIAL PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Home visitors bring important personal characteristics to their work along with knowledge and skills. They act in accordance with a code of professional ethics, while bringing a sense of fun and enjoyment to their work. Effective home visitors are:

- genuinely warm toward and respectful of the people they serve;
- caring people capable of forming and maintaining authentic, supportive relationships with children, parents and co-workers;
- emotionally secure with clear personal boundaries;
- reflective about themselves, their personal views and their work;
- flexible and adaptable;
- willing and eager to learn and improve;
- able to stay calm in a range of difficult situations;
- non-judgmental;
- sensitive to and respectful of cultural differences;
- comfortable dealing with a range of emotions in self and others;
- good listeners, attentive to non-verbal messages;
- well organized.

THE HOME VISITOR: SKILLS, EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE

"Parents need to know that we care before they care what we know."
— Home Visitor in St. Louis, Missouri

The effective home visitor possesses knowledge, skills and experience in her field. Orientation for a home visitor should include a thorough review of the organization's mission, guiding principles and desired outcomes. In addition, each home visitor should have general knowledge, skills, or experience in each of the following areas:

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

- Cultural awareness
- Building relationships with individuals and families
- Adult learning styles
- Communication skills with children and families
- Critical thinking and problem solving

EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

- Child development
- Early childhood screening and assessment
- The early care and education system
- Resources for children and their families
- Language development and early literacy
- Developmentally appropriate practices
- Rights of children with disabilities
- Inclusion of all children in quality, supportive and developmentally appropriate environments

HEALTH AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Family health care maintenance and prevention
- Health education and promotion
- Mental health issues and resources
- Referral procedures
- Substance abuse issues and resources
- Household safety

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- Local support systems and networks
- Budgeting, money and household management
- Public assistance system and resources
- Housing, tenants' rights and the legal system
- Referral procedures
- Adult education and training
- Employment opportunities

- Child Care
- Transportation

PARENTING EDUCATION

- Infant/Child development (e.g. attachment, individuation, motor development, language development, and literacy)
- Positive child guidance and parenting
- Balancing family and work
- Impact of child abuse and neglect, effects of violence and substance abuse in the family
- Family relationships and life skills
- Family relationships and goal setting
- Parenting support programs

GENERAL TOPICS

- Confidentiality and release of information
- Child protection and mandated reporting
- Community collaboration
- Personal safety
- Emergency protocols
- Professional ethics

ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR THE HOME VISITOR

The task of being a home visitor is rewarding and demanding. She must have substantial support from program staff. The organization must provide a clear vision and guiding principles. The home visitor must understand the importance of her role in achieving the program's desired outcomes for children and families.

SUPPORT

The home visitor is a generalist. Although she may have expertise in her specific field, the holistic nature of the work demands knowledge across many different disciplines. When family needs arise that require a more intensive response, it is critical that the home visitor understands her limitations and has back up support, including on-call professionals in mental health care, early childhood, health, and social work. Professionals should be available to the home visitor for consultation and coaching on a regular basis, and to work directly with the family when necessary.

SUPERVISION

The home visitor should have frequent and ongoing supervision. The supervisor must be respectful, objective, and supportive. The purpose of supervision is to offer feedback that can be used to improve performance and to promote personal and professional development. In addition, supervision helps assure that assessment of the family situation is accurate and the home visitor's responses are appropriate.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Programs should offer professional development opportunities which are relevant and timely in order to best meet the needs of children and families as well as the professional needs and goals of the home visitor. Home visitors are encouraged to develop Individual Professional Development Plans (IPDP's) with their supervisors. The plans should be supported by the program with the necessary encouragement and resources.

CRISIS AND EMERGENCY SUPPORT

Situations may arise that pose a potential threat to the home visitor's safety. The home visitor has a responsibility to recognize and report unsafe situations to her supervisor. The organization must acknowledge the possible personal safety, crisis and emergency issues that may arise with home based work. The home visitor and supervisor will work together to find a solution that promotes the home visitor's safety. Emergency protocols and safety parameters for home visiting should be established and in place.

EVALUATION

Evaluation is part of a continuous improvement system intended to monitor practice and provide valuable information about program effectiveness. It occurs on both the individual and program levels. Individual evaluation of the home visitor includes assessment of performance as defined in a job description. Home visitors should have the opportunity to be active participants in the evaluation process including the opportunity to complete a self-assessment. Program evaluation looks at the effectiveness of services in achieving program goals and outcomes. The evaluation should gather information about

program performance and consumer satisfaction. All aspects of the organizational system should be studied, including changes in child and family behaviors and outcomes, amount and quality of service delivered by the home visitor, amount and quality of organizational back-up and support, and the availability of appropriate services and resources from the community and the funders. Evaluation results are used to influence decisions which will improve services for children and families.

A FINAL NOTE

Even when a home visitor embodies all the best characteristics and skills, not every home visiting relationship will feel like a success. When looking at human relationships and growth, success is not always clear-cut. There may be times that it's hard to see growth. Nevertheless, doors may have been opened and new possibilities made visible—possibilities the family may act on later. At the same time, issues that puzzle the home visitor with one family may be understood with another family, several months in the future. At the heart of home visiting lies the belief that authentic and caring relationships between people do make a difference.

Home visiting provides a unique opportunity for parents/families and support persons to work together in a comfortable environment. It is a cooperative effort intended to improve and enhance the lives of children and families.

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Some of the Vermont Programs Offering Home Visits

Community Action Program Outreach Workers

Child Care -Trainers, Food Program Personnel, Licensers

Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program - Risk Assessors

Developmental and Mental Health - Case Managers and Coordinators

Early Education Initiative

Early Head Start

Early Periodic Screening, Diagnosis & Treatment (Vermont Department of Health)

Essential Early Education

Even Start

Extension Service

Families First

Family Advocacy (Social and Rehabilitation Services)

Family Foster Care Homes – Licensers

Family, Infant and Toddler Project

Head Start

Healthy Babies (Vermont Health Department)

Home Health Agencies

Home-School Coordinators

Hospice

Refugee Resettlement Program

Intensive Family Based Services (Social and Rehabilitation Services/Baird)

Kindergarten Programs

Literacy Programs

New Horizons

Parent Child Centers

Parent to Parent of Vermont

Parents As Teachers (Visiting Nurses Association, Parent Child Centers)

Public School Personnel

Reach Up

Religious Groups

Rural Education Center - Vermont Migrant Education Program

Respite Care

Social Services

Success By Six

Title IV - "Indian" Education

Vermont Parent Information Center

Visiting Nurse Association/Home Health

Welcome Baby

Women, Infants, Children (WIC) – Vermont Health Department

For more information about the above programs and to request additional copies, call:
Parents Assistance Line: 1-800-PARENTS • 1-800-727-3687